

# *Commentary: Similarities and Differences Among Educational*

## *Psychology Textbooks: An Author's Perspective*

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In 1997, Ken Kiewra and Patti Gubbels published an article in *Educational Psychology Review* proposing that educational psychology textbooks be guided by several basic principles—for instance, that textbooks:

- Reflect a clear model of teaching
- Facilitate effective cognitive processes in readers
- Integrate theory and practice
- Provide opportunities to practice teaching skills

In Kiewra's and Gubbels's analysis, textbooks of the time came up short in many respects. Overall, the texts did *not* practice what they preached.

Educational psychology textbooks have come a long way since 1997, and increasingly, I think, they *do* follow the principles that Kiewra and Gubbels enumerated. Although they don't necessarily identify a particular underlying teaching model, principles from information processing theory and constructivism are clearly at work in every one of them. For instance, many texts begin each chapter with objectives or advance organizers, provide concrete examples to illustrate abstract ideas, and promote meaning-making and elaboration through occasional higher-level questions that ask readers to extend the material they're learning. Furthermore, most current texts closely link theory and application both within the running text and through specific application features with such titles as "What Would You Do?," "Classroom Connections," and "Suggestions for Teaching in Your Classroom." Many also embed opportunities for practice and reflection within each chapter, perhaps by asking readers to analyze case studies or interpret classroom artifacts.

These recent improvements in educational psychology textbooks are probably the result of two factors. First, of course, we authors are

increasingly reflecting on what and how we're writing and are, of our own accord, trying to practice what we preach. But second, the market for educational psychology textbooks is a very competitive one. Textbook publishers are well aware that educational psychology courses are included in the great majority of teacher education programs across the country and that publishing a popular textbook for such courses can be highly profitable. To capture a significant share of the introductory educational psychology market, a textbook must be a very *good* one that an instructor will want to use semester after semester. In fact, it must be good enough to enable its publisher to recoup the many thousands of dollars (sometimes as much as a quarter of a million, I've been told) that have been expended in bringing the book to fruition in the first place.

### **SIMILARITIES AMONG TEXTBOOKS**

To some extent, competition in the marketplace leads to similarities across textbooks. Oftentimes instructors switch from one book to another only if the switch doesn't require much change in classroom lectures, activities, and so on (this is the *inertia* factor). Furthermore, a new book must be at least as visually enticing to readers as the old one (this is the *captivation* factor). Such factors lead to at least three similarities across many textbooks currently on the market:

**1. General topics covered.** Instructors expect certain topics to be in an educational psychology textbook, and they won't adopt a book from which these topics are missing. For example, in an earlier edition of my own *Educational Psychology: Developing Learners* book, my editor and I initially planned to leave out classical conditioning so that we could devote more space to cognitive processes in learning. ("Yes, classical conditioning is important," we reasoned," but not as important as, say, metacognition and self-regulation, and

we have only so much space in the book.”). Several of our reviewers complained—“I won’t use the book without it,” they told us—and so classical conditioning remains in the book to this day.

**2. Organizational scheme.** The order in which topics are addressed is fairly consistent across books: development and diversity; then learning and cognition; then motivation, instruction and classroom management (with the order of these three topics varying a bit from book to book); and finally assessment. There are certainly logical rationales for this sequence; for instance, it makes sense to talk about how children learn before talking about what motivates them to learn, and instruction typically precedes assessment in actual classroom practice. Yet cases could be made for other sequences as well. I’ve recently written a book that presents some of these topics in a different order; for example, it discusses cognitive processes before cognitive development, and it talks about motivation before social development. The book reflects the sequence I now use in my own educational psychology courses, but only time will tell whether others will see rhyme and reason to my approach.

**3. Visual appeal.** The most popular educational psychology textbooks now have many visual features—photos, cartoons, vivid colors, and so on—that capture instructors’ and students’ attention and pull them into the book, at least temporarily. In recent years, the bestselling books have all been printed in four colors—a process that adds considerably to the cost—rather than in black and white. Think about it: When a new but unrequested textbook arrives in your mailbox and you flip through its pages, what things first catch your eye? If you’re like most human beings, it might very well be the colors and other salient visual features (I myself zero in on the cartoons). A textbook without these features very quickly gets relegated to the look-at-when-I-have-spare-time pile or, perhaps, to the give-to-a-used-book-buyer pile.

## DIFFERENCES AMONG TEXTBOOKS

Competition in the textbook market also leads to some important differences among texts. With each new edition of a textbook, editors and authors are looking for ways in which to make their book in some way better

than its competitors—ideally, sufficiently better that it entices instructors away from other books. Furthermore, some instructors become increasingly dissatisfied with the book they are currently using, perhaps because it doesn’t adequately address topics they think are important or perhaps because students regularly complain about it on teacher evaluations (this is the *dissatisfaction* factor). Then sometimes instructors become frustrated by how little their students seem to be learning and remembering from a book or how rarely students can apply what they’ve learned to actual teaching situations (this is the *ineffective pedagogy* factor).

Over the past few years, such factors have led to a variety of improvements in educational psychology textbooks, with textbook authors and publishers often taking somewhat different approaches. Current texts now differ in at least five critical respects. Three of these—specific content, writing style, and pedagogy—are largely in the hands of the author. The fourth—design—is largely in the hands of the editorial staff. The fifth—ancillary package—is in the hands of several individuals who sometimes work collaboratively but more often work independently of one another.

**1. Specific content.** If you look at subheadings and at lengths of specific sections in different textbooks, you will find considerable variation among textbooks in coverage of certain topics. Some topics—for instance, physical development, schedules of reinforcement, learning styles, self-handicapping, humanism—appear in some books, but not in others. When most or all books address a particular topic—as is true for, say, language development, metacognition, or attribution theory—they differ considerably in the depth of coverage. Chapters on child development reflect a common divide among developmental psychologists about whether to use a topical approach (cognitive development, social development, etc.) or a chronological approach (early childhood, middle childhood, etc.). An especially noticeable source of variability is the extent to which textbooks focus on particular theorists (e.g., Piaget, Vygotsky, Kohlberg, Erikson), on the one hand, or on contemporary research centered around particular topics (e.g., theory of mind, development of learning strategies), on the other. I suspect that such differences are the result not only of perceived

market demands, but also of textbook authors' differing epistemological beliefs about educational psychology as a discipline.

**2. Writing style.** Educational psychology texts differ quite a bit in writing style. Some texts fall closer to the "formal, professional" end of what we might call the *academic writing continuum*. Writing at this end of the continuum is characterized by the use of third person almost exclusively, by descriptions of many research studies, and by fairly terse explanations. Thus it mimics the writing seen in professional journals to some degree. The other end of the continuum could be labeled "informal, personal." This type of writing is characterized by considerable use of first and second person; research, although cited, is not necessarily described in detail; and explanations include personal examples and anecdotes. Authors who prefer more formal writing are presumably trying to help readers "grow" in their ability to read and learn from academic writing. Authors who use an informal style are perhaps concerned more about helping readers understand psychological concepts than about promoting growth in academic reading comprehension skills per se.

**3. Pedagogy.** The pedagogy of a book includes the specific features that are intentionally used to facilitate readers' learning. Some pedagogical elements are obvious: tables, diagrams, illustrative student artifacts, margin glossary notes, application boxes, and so on. Others, such as concrete examples that illustrate abstract concepts and questions that ask readers to self-reflect, may be integrated into the running text and so don't necessarily stand out on first inspection. But each of these features reflects the author's beliefs about how he or she can best help readers understand, remember, and apply important concepts and principles. The presence of very *few* such features in a book suggests, to me at least, that either the author is writing for a fairly sophisticated audience (which is sometimes true) or hasn't given much thought to how best to help readers learn (which unfortunately is also sometimes true). In any case, all of the bestsellers in the introductory educational psychology market have a fair number of pedagogical features.

**4. Design.** The design of a book includes its use of specific color, fonts, illustrative photographs, and so on. For instance, in the first

edition of my *Educational Psychology: Developing Learners* book, basic colors—fire engine red, kelly green, sky blue—were used to demark certain pedagogical features. Later editions have gone to more muted, "interior decorator" colors that comprise a carefully chosen color palette, the assumption perhaps being that such colors are less brash and more soothing to the eye. Trim size—the size of each page, which affects apparent (but not real) overall length of a book—is also a design consideration. The general rule of thumb is that instructors won't adopt a book that exceeds 600 pages of text. Given market demands for so many topics—educational psychology classes often provide students' only exposure to child development, special education, and assessment—keeping a book under 600 pages can be a tall order for any author. An alternative is to increase trim size—that is, to make each page as big as possible.

**5. Ancillary package.** To be competitive in the introductory educational psychology market, publishers must offer a variety of materials—test banks, study guides, instructor's manuals, videos, companion Websites, and so on—that support instruction. Typically such ancillary materials for instructors are no-cost "freebies," although publishers often don't send them until instructors specifically request them. Some ancillary materials for students (e.g., companion Websites) are freebies as well, and instructors can often request that textbooks be shrink-wrapped, at no extra charge, with study guides or semester-long "subscriptions" to Websites with extensive resources (e.g., see Merrill Education/Prentice Hall's *Educator Learning Center* or Allyn & Bacon's *MyLabSchool*). Ancillary materials differ considerably in quality, however, depending on who has authored them (for example, sometimes publishers hire graduate students who have little or no experience in writing test items or who mistakenly conceptualize a "good" study guide as being one that asks students to memorize definitions and other isolated facts). Shrewd instructors carefully scrutinize the content of any ancillary materials they plan to use, being especially attuned to the extent to which ancillaries encourage conceptual understanding, transfer, problem solving, and other higher-level thinking skills.

## NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL

Is there a *best* body of knowledge to include in a book, a *best* writing style to employ, a *most effective* combination of pedagogical features to provide, an *ideal* book design to promote learning, or a *best* package of ancillaries to use? Of course not. Educational psychology courses serve somewhat different purposes in different teacher preparation programs, and particular textbooks and ancillaries may be more or less suited for

varying circumstances. I strongly urge my colleagues who teach educational psychology to reflect carefully on what *their* circumstances are—what specific concepts and principles they believe are most important for their students to master, how metacognitively sophisticated their students tend to be, and so on—and to choose their textbooks accordingly. There is simply no one-size-fits-all in educational psychology texts.

#### REFERENCE

Kiewra, K. A., & Gubbels, P. S. (1997). Are educational psychology courses educationally and psychologically sound? What textbooks and teachers say. *Educational Psychology Review*, 9, 121–149.